DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 230 995 CS 504 238

AUTHOR Allen, R. R.
TITLE On the Nature of Teaching Excellence.
INSTITUTION Wisconsin Communication Association.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Journal of the Wisconsin Communication Association; v13 p1-5 1983.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; Secondary Education; *Secondary School Teachers; *Speech Communication; Speech Instruction; Student Teacher Relationship; *Teacher Characteristics; Teacher Education; *Teacher Effectiveness; Teacher Qualifications; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

While much has been said and written about teaching excellence, educational research has not defined what it means to be an excellent teacher, so it is important for teachers in all subject areas to initiate and sustain a dialogue about teaching excellence. Six attributes characterize excellence in a secondary school communications teacher. First, the excellent teacher has a positive attitude toward self and students. Second, the excellent teacher is enthusiastic, vibrant, and a dynamic spokesperson for the field of knowledge he or she represents. Third, the excellent teacher is committed to active student involvement in learning and encourages students to test and temper information in arriving at their own conclusions about human communication. Fourth, the excellent teacher provides appropriate levels of intellectual challenge, inviting students to search for their own ideas, explanations, and theories about the way communication "works." Fifth, the excellent teacher is proficient in a variety of teaching skills, and sixth, the excellent teacher is committed to professional growth. When teachers have answered the question of what constitutes excellence in teachers, they will be better able to discuss matters of teacher preparation and the nurturing of the profession. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED230995

ON THE NATURE OF TEACHING EXCELLENCE

by R.R. Allen

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
R. R. Allen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 504 238

ON THE NATURE OF TEACHING EXCELLENCE

by R.R. Allen

Much has been said and written about teaching excellence. I. David Glick, in the introduction to his annotated bibliography,[1] observed that he had found 1,300 articles on the topic published within the last three years alone. However, he also observed that "if we were to discount all descriptive studies, narrations, analogies, and perception surveys and stick with process-product research alone, there would be considerable reason to remain virtually mute on this topic."[2] Which is to say, educational research has not defined, for now and all times, what it means to be an excellent teacher.

The realization that there is much yet to be known about effective teaching could, indeed, prompt us to remain mute on the topic. However, we might just as reasonably conclude that since "teaching excellence" remains an elusive phenomenon it is fair game for anyone wishing to aim a pen or a tongue at it. I favor the latter conclusion. I think it is important for teachers in all subject matter fields to initiate and sustain a dialogue about teaching excellence. The topic is certainly a timely one. Donald Barnes, of the Education Commission of the States, has reported that "twenty states are looking at the various issues related to the general topic of teacher quality."[3] In Wisconsin, a task force on teaching and teacher education has been established by State Superintendent Herbert Grover. Additionally, the topic is of immense importance to the teaching profession. The profession of teaching has received a good deal of "bad press" recently. The public has been told that those who enter the teaching profession are less gifted academically than their peers entering most other professions,[4] that those who leave the teaching profession prematurely are the very ones who score most highly on national teacher examinations,[5] and, of course, that teachers fail to develop essential

student skills. Whatever the merit of these allegations, the popular image of the teaching profession has suffered.

As one who believes that teaching is a noble profession, I find the erosion of public trust disheartening, if not alarming. When the public believes that teachers are not doing their jobs well, it is difficult to win support for improvements in the conditions of employment. When the teaching profession is assigned low social status, it is difficult to attract and keep the very best people.

If this unfortunate trend is to be reversed, I think it is important that groups of teachers, including those who hold membership in the Wisconsin Communication Association, reaffirm their commitment to teaching excellence. As a first step, such groups should encourage professional exchange about the nature of teaching excellence. As a stimulus for additional dialogue, this article will discuss six attributes which characterize, in the author's judgment, the excellent secondary school teacher of communication.

First of all, the excellent teacher of communication has a positive attitude toward self and others. Although this attribute may seem initially vague, I am convinced that it is the primary factor contributing to teaching eminence. The "I'm OK, You're OK" teacher feels comfortable in the teaching role and feels confident about his/her ability to conceptualize, organize, and implement instruction. In a study of twelve superlative teachers, Herbert Van Schaack[6] found that two of the most popular statements chosen by excellent teachers, performing a Q Sort task, were "I feel enthusiastic acout teaching" and "I feel confident in my role as a teacher."

The "I'm OK, You're OK" teacher also has a positive attitude toward students and their ability to experience learning success. Van Schaack found that superlative teachers help students feel that they "can make worthwhile contributions," treat all students "in an accepting way," and demonstrate interper-

sonal warmth.[7] The teacher's attitude toward students and their learning potential is often a self-fulfilling prophecy: teachers who respect young people and have high expectations encourage student learning success; those who treat young people with disdain and expect little from them discourage student achievement. I am convinced that it is possible to predict a teacher's level of success with 90 percent accuracy by listening to what (s)he says about students in the faculty lounge.

Second, the excellent teacher of communication is enthusiastic. We have all known teachers who are apathetic, dull, and boring. Although these teachers may feel a quiet, personal enthusiasm for that which they teach, they are incapable of inspiring others to share their intellectual commitment and concern. However, excellent teachers of communication, and other subject matter fields, are vibrant and dynamic spokespersons for the field of knowledge they represent. In his study of superlative teachers, Van Schaack discovered that such teachers "convey a great sense of commitment, excitement, and involvement in their subjects" . . . by employing "facial expression, gestures, and voice modulation."[8]

The very best teachers of communication I have observed have themselves been articulate, expressive, and dynamic communicators. They are what Sherry Parish of Madison Memorial High School describes as "bigger than life" in the classroom. They establish personal relationships with students through eye contact. Their gestures, movement, and facial expression demonstrate their involvement with and enthusiasm for human communication. They are sensitive to classroom and world occurrences that reflect communication principles in action and report or react to such occurrences in a vocal style that is animated and interesting. In sum, their enthusiasm for human communication is contagious.

Third, the excellent teacher of communication is committed to active student involvement in learning. In an exciting new book, The Paideia Proposal:

An Educational Manifesto, Mortimer J. Adler observes that "all genuine learning is active, not passive. It involves the use of the mind, not just the memory. It is a process of discovery, in which the student is the main agent, not the teacher."[9] He continues by asserting that when teachers fail to understand the true nature of learning "by filling passive receptacles, they act merely as indoctrinators-overseers of memorization--but they are not teachers."[10]

Excellent teachers of communication, on the other hand, are not primarily interested in transfering information from their own heads or notes into the heads or notes of their students. Rather, they want their students to test and temper information in arriving at their own conclusions about human communication. In a typical moment of instruction, students are as likely to be found in small group structures as in whole class structures. When in small group structures, students may be seen interacting about topics or learning activities of their own or the teacher's design. When in whole class structures, students engage in discussions that are as often centered around their own perceptions and questions as around the perceptions and questions of the teacher. In other words, it you wish to find excellent teachers of communication, don't look for them at the front of classrooms in which the desks are always arranged in tidy rows.

Fourth, the excellent teacher of communication provides appropriate levels of intellectual challenge. Much of the instruction that is provided in secondary schools makes, in Van Schaack's words, "low cognitive demands"[11] on students. Many teachers are satisfied to merely teach and test at recall, comprehension, and, perhaps, application levels of cognitive demand. Their students are expected, even in moments of active learning, to simply rehearse the ideas of others. However, the excellent teacher of communication invites students to search for their own ideas, explanations, and theories about the way that communication "works." The excellent teacher expects students to analyze commu-

nication messages and encounters, to combine and integrate information in arriving at unique syntheses, and to make evaluative judgments about communication messages and concepts.

What the preceding paragraph says, quite simply, is that excellent teachers of communication provide opportunities for students to use and build upon information. Information that is acquired on low cognitive demand is information that is soon forgotten. We retain information, and appreciate it more, when we use it and build upon it to make sense of the world around us. After studying "levels of information" communicated in interpersonal exchange, one teacher sent students forth into the community to analyze the levels of information exchanged by people on buses, in coffee shops, and in supermarket check-out lines. On returning to the classroom, the students formed groups to dramatize what they learned about levels of information exchanged in diverse settings. Finally, the students, working in groups, theorized about the variables in a communication encounter that influence the level of information exchanged. By placing high cognitive demands on students, such activities increase the likelihood that communication knowledge will be retained and employed in future communication encounters.

Fifth, the excellent teacher of communication is proficient in a variety of teaching skills. Van Schaack found that his superlative teachers scored high on a variable called "organized demeanor" which embraced such teaching characteristics as being systematic, purposeful, conscientious, in control, observant, and resourceful.[12]

I personally prefer to call this cluster of skills "intellectual acuity." In my judgment, excellent teachers of communication approach instruction in an intellectually rigorous way: they are able to identify desired learning outcomes with precision, to design a series of learning activities capable of accomplishing such objectives, and to assess student progress toward the

achievement of learning goals. Excellent teachers of communication implement instruction skillfully: they are able to present information in a well-organized fashion, to make clear assignments, to summarize information, and to ask probing questions. In other words, excellent teachers of communication know what they are about.

Finally, the excellent teacher of communication is committed to professional growth. Van Schaack found that superlative teachers show " a deep concern for professional development. Additional graduate courses, readings, and participation in workshops and conferences underscore their commitment to renew themselves and improve their teaching."[13] I am convinced that excellent teachers of communication have this same kind of intellectual curiosity and desire for self-improvement and that they seize every available opportunity to grow in their personal knowledge of communication and the means through which it is taught to the young.

However, I would like to add that excellent teachers of communication are dedicated to the growth of the profession as well as to personal professional growth. Excellent teachers of communication care about the profession of teaching communication. They participate in the affairs of the Wisconsin Communication Association and other professional organizations. They volunteer to serve as cooperating teachers in university teaching internship programs. They participate in and/or follow closely the deliberations of D.P.I. Study Groups and Task Forces whose findings may influence the quantity and quality of communication instruction in the state. Excellent teachers care about the profession.

In this brief article, I have pondered the nature of teaching excellence in the profession of secondary school communication education. I have done so in the belief that the topic is of critical importance at this time. In so doing, I have neglected Pat Townsend's request that I "talk about teacher

preparation--needs, problems, curricula, advice." As professionals in communication education, I think it is important that we first address the broader question, "What constitutes excellence in teachers of communication?" When we have answered this question, we will be in a better position to talk about matters of teacher preparation and certification and the nurturing of a profession.

Notes

1. I. David Glick, The Search for Excellence in Teaching: An Annotated Bibliography. Washington D.C.: Eric Clearinghouse on Teacher Education, February 1982, p. 44.
2. Ibid.
3. Reported by Dianne Paley in "Grover Cites Teachers' Needs," Wisconsin State Journal, Friday, December 17, 1982, Section 1, page 6.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Herbert Van Schaack, A Qualitative Study of Excellence in Teaching. Washington D.C.: Eric Clearinghouse on Teacher Education, February 1982, p. 24.
7. Ibid., pp. 24-27.
8. Ibid., p. 28.
9. Mortimer Adler, The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1982, p. 50.
10. Ibid., p. 51.
11. Van Schaack, Op. Cit., p. 41.
12. Ibid., p. 30.
13. Ibid., p. 33.